

Speaker 1: [music 00:00:03].

Rickerby Hinds: Welcome to the Creator State, where we share stories of social innovation and entrepreneurship for movers, shakers, creators, and change makers. Each episode will celebrate success and failure, ingenuity and the endless pursuit of knowledge, from education to implementation. Join us as we explore everything in between, the Creator State.

Rickerby Hinds: After learning her 10 year old sister was being bullied at school for her dark skin, UCR alumni, Taylor Pollard, tweeted a photo of her younger sister with the hashtag "flexin' in my complexion". The photo and phrase went viral with positive messages flooding in from around the world, including support from celebrities, Alicia Keys, Lena Waithe, and Lupita Nyong'o. And just like that a business was born, launching with a t-shirt line made in their garage that sold out in 10 minutes.

Rickerby Hinds: Under the leadership of Taylor and her sister Kheris Rogers, Flexin' In My Complexion has evolved from t-shirts emblazoned with the phrase once used by their grandmother to encourage their confidence, into a nonprofit aimed at empowering youth against bullying. Taylor now splits time between managing business operations and her younger sister's exploding fashion career as a model and designer. The youngest to ever show during fashion week. As well as her speaking engagements, media appearances and partnerships with LeBron James and Nike. Join us for our conversation with Taylor Pollard about using social media savvy to launch a business and a movement. And learn how a major change at UCR aligned perfectly to prepare her for the future she couldn't even imagine. I'm your host Rickerby Hinds, welcome to the Creator State.

Rickerby Hinds: So welcome to the Creator State, my name is Rickerby Hinds, and today I am having a conversation with Taylor Pollard.

Taylor Pollard: Hi, how are you doing?

Rickerby Hinds: Hi, Taylor, how are you doing?

Taylor Pollard: I'm doing good. How are you?

Rickerby Hinds: You are a UCR alum.

Taylor Pollard: Yes, I graduated in 2016.

Rickerby Hinds: And what was your major, and what was your area of focus?

Taylor Pollard: Funny story. So when I started UCR, I actually was a business major, but it ended up not working out. The first year of school, I feel like it was just hard for me adjusting to being on my own. And so I ended up being released from the

program, but I ended up studying photography. But that actually was like a blessing in disguise because with the social media platform that I've built now, you know, social media is all about visual and everything. So with photography I feel like without majoring as a photography major, I wouldn't be where I am now. So I think it was a blessing in disguise I ended up studying art.

Rickerby Hinds: Well it wasn't a very good disguise because, I mean, what you are doing now came, from my understanding, directly from photography or taking a photo. So let's talk a little bit about Flexin' In My Complexion, and how this photograph that you took played a role in the development of this company.

Taylor Pollard: Flexin' In My Complexion we originally started because my sister, she was being bullied in school for her having dark skin complexion. The thing is, in the media I feel like sometimes you don't always see people of darker complexion represented in a positive light. And so with photography, you know, I was like, okay, well let's take some pictures. Like you don't see these images in the media. Well, let's just take it ourselves. And when I posted the picture on Twitter it actually went viral. It got like over 300,000 likes, and 500,000 retweets. It was super crazy. And so that's really when Flexin' In My Complexion began as a business.

Rickerby Hinds: You mentioned photography, but you also mentioned businesses as well. So clearly it seems like these things played a role in how the company evolved and where you went with it.

Taylor Pollard: Definitely. With social media I feel like having business sense and also being creative really goes hand-in-hand. So like with studying photography, and I studied painting and digital art here at UCR. Me studying that, it gave me a different outlook of what I post and how I post. Because really with building a business, especially on social media, I think it's important to know who your audience is and what type of content they want to see, and with understanding that that's how you really can start to make money from social media. And people started doing paid promotions and stuff like that.

Rickerby Hinds: That is so... That's really great.

Taylor Pollard: Thing is, for us, it never was really about the money. You know, that just kind of came. But I think also with Kheris's platform and with the Flexin' In My Complexion Foundation that we're doing, we're just kind of teaching people like, you know when you're really passionate about something, and when you really focus on your goals, you know the money will come. You know? And I feel like I learned that too, like post graduating, because my mom was like, oh, well you should apply for a job to be a clerk at LA County. And I was like, what? Like you know, I'm super creative. You know, that's no shades people that are clerks, which, you know it's a great job. But you know, I just knew I was way too creative to be doing something like that. So it's just like when you have, like you know in your heart what you want to do, it's just about create those goals, set

goals for yourself. And really zone in and go for it. You know, so you can be happy. Because I think, you know, happiness is everything

Rickerby Hinds: That's really great. It would have been great to have you as a student, but you chose the other route, which was to not take my class. But can you talk a little bit about how your education played a role in what you're doing now?

Taylor Pollard: Yeah, my education really played a huge role with where I am now. Just because anybody can take a picture. You know, we all have iPhones or phones, we can all take pictures. But it's just having, like everyone doesn't understand lighting, or everyone doesn't understand the aesthetic aspects of photos. They're just like, okay this looks cool. But when I'm taking a picture of my sister for social media, I'm like, okay, I'm going to have happy wear this color. And then we'll have this color background. And complimentary colors, you know, so we'll know for the balance of the photo. And I'll have you pose like this. So I'm really strategic with it. I know it gets really technical.

Rickerby Hinds: No, that's good though.

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. But I really learned how to do that with taking photography classes, and our classes in general as far as complimentary colors and angles. And-

Rickerby Hinds: You know, a lot of times when we think of academia, or when people think of academia, we think of the more academic things that we would pursue while we're here. But knowing also that there are things that are very practical that you can also take advantage of in this type of space is very cool.

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. You know what? And even when I told my family I was switching to an art major, they were like, what? Like are you out of your mind? You know? But I think the thing is about art, there's art literally in everything. You know, even the biggest companies when they want to do ads or anything, they're hiring photographers, they're hiring digital artists to create that type of content. And so even when I explain that to them, they're just like, what? But yeah, after graduating they see what I do. They're like, oh, like, okay, okay. Like I get what you're saying now,

Rickerby Hinds: When did you know that Flexin' In My Complexion was an idea that you wanted to pursue?

Taylor Pollard: Well, when my sister's picture first went viral on Twitter, literally people across the world were messaging me and her saying, oh my gosh, like, you know, I went through the same thing that you went through as far as being bullied for things you can't change, like my skin complexion, or whatever it is, like my body shape. And so we were like, okay, well we want to take this phrase "flexin' in my complexion" and start to build a brand on it. You know, because so many different people from different cultures, ethnicities, they all can relate to the message of Flexin' In My Complexion. So that's when we're like, okay, well let's

start off with something basic like t-shirts and let's just see if it does well. And so within the first 10 minutes of us posting the shirts, they literally sold out. So we were like, wow. Like, okay. Yeah, we're onto something.

Rickerby Hinds: So you sell out in 10 minutes, what are you thinking? Clearly this is an idea that came from a negative experience. And I know that the phrase kind of originated with your grandmother. Tell me about your grandmother's use of this phrase as a means of empowering yourself, I would imagine as well as your sister.

Taylor Pollard: My grandmother, she's from Louisiana. And this is just, I don't know where that phrase came from, but it's just something that she will always tell us. Specifically Kheris because she started being bullied for her skin complexion when she was just six years old. And so at the time she didn't really understand, why are people treating me different? Because first she used to go to an elementary school in El Segundo. It was a majority white school. So I think in her class it was only like three other children of color, and she was the only one that was dark skin.

Taylor Pollard: And so at the time, the kids, they wouldn't play with her, they wouldn't invite her to birthday parties and stuff like that. And you know, it just really stemmed from, you know, her looking different from everybody in the classroom. And so with my grandmother telling her to flex in her complexion, it was really just to empower her that, you know, everyone has differences. And it's not right for someone to treat you different just because you look different. Because everyone is different, you know? No one's the same, or else this world would be completely boring, you know?

Rickerby Hinds: Yes.

Taylor Pollard: So yeah, it just stand from my granny just really tried to instill in her to love herself for who she is.

Rickerby Hinds: So you said your sister's name, it kind of floated through. But tell us your sister's name, and what her approach was when you began this conversation about, you know, using her experience to build a business, which is what you're doing now.

Taylor Pollard: Right. The thing is, when you're telling your story on social media, you really have to be vulnerable, you know? Because you're opening yourself up to criticism, whether it's support or whether it's negative.

Rickerby Hinds: Yes.

Taylor Pollard: Because you know, now I feel like we're living in a world where with creating social media, you know at first kids think that it's fun, but at the same time you're opening yourself up to strangers. And people putting those opinions about you and stuff that may not necessarily be true. They may just be saying it

to make you feel bad. I feel like social media, especially with kids who really haven't developed confidence yet, you know it just makes them start off low. You may see someone who looks a certain way and you wish that you looked that way, and now you have some sort of low self confidence about that too.

Taylor Pollard: Well with Kheris's social media platform, we really just wanted to promote self love, and that's where Flexin' In My Complexion really stems from. And it's just saying that, you know, it doesn't matter what your size is, what your complexion is, what your financial background is. You know, like you really are enough how you are. But you know, she really built confidence from doing that. When she first went viral she did a story with, I believe it was CBS. And then that's when, you know, people started following her and stuff like that, and things start going crazy. And then that's when she went to New York Fashion Week. So just from doing that, it really helped her build her confidence.

Rickerby Hinds: So Taylor, can you talk a little bit about your role specifically in the business, and what are some of the things that you're doing in the business that is helping it develop and grow?

Taylor Pollard: Okay, so I'm Kheris's manager, her sister managers. So I call myself her sisterger. And as far as my role is on a day-to-day, it really involves answering thousands of emails weekly and figuring out what deals and stuff will work for her and for her brand, and creating content. Because her business really is social media, you know? And so, for example, like when we worked with Nike, we had to create...

Taylor Pollard: They'll tell you like, okay, we need you to create X amount of pictures and X amount of videos and stuff like that. And so me and her were really just brainstorm together and figure out, okay, what type of picture do we want to create? What kind of videos we want to make, and stuff like that. And then we just kind of do it. So it's really a collaborative effort between me and my sister. And even with the clothes too, figuring out, okay what do we want to do next? And because she doesn't know how to draw, so she'll tell me her idea. And I'll go and create it. And you know, just kind of make it happen.

Rickerby Hinds: Tell me where you are now as a company. I know that you have moved into additional areas from the t-shirts. Can you talk a little bit more about where the company is, what you're doing, and what ultimately your vision might be?

Taylor Pollard: The thing is too, Kheris as a brand is different from Flexin' In My Complexion now. And so Kheris, actually from the work that we've done with Flexin' In My Complexion, we started it a nonprofit now.

Rickerby Hinds: Okay.

Taylor Pollard: And so a couple of weeks ago we had our first event in Inglewood where we did a back to school drive. And so we gave away free school supplies and backpacks and stuff like that. Literally to over 600 kids, and over-

Rickerby Hinds: wow.

Taylor Pollard: Yeah, over a thousand kids showed up. So we felt so bad that everybody couldn't get everything. But you know, just using our platform to be able to give back to the community is kind of the direction that we're going in right now. And we are blessed to have so many big sponsors like the Lakers Foundation, and they donated a whole bunch of school supplies. And the Dodgers, they donated a whole bunch of Dodger tickets for every kid that came.

Rickerby Hinds: So you said Kheris is one entity, which is your sister's name. And then Flexin' In My Complexion is a different entity. Can you tell us the difference between those two and what you're doing with those, with both of those companies?

Taylor Pollard: Right. So Flexin' In My Complexion is still based upon encouraging people to love yourself and who you are. And we want to help give people the tools that they need, or kids the tools that they need in order to be successful, and to be confident in who they are. So Kheris on social media, she has this huge platform, and so she's also encouraging people to love themselves and who they are. She does a lot of other things as well as too, as far as like public speaking, she goes around the country doing public speaking, or modeling, because she models for Nike and a bunch of other big brands too. So that's just like a separate-

Rickerby Hinds: No, this is really great. I'm going to use a really bad metaphor, but it's kind of like the Wu-Tang Clan, when the Wu-Tang Clan had their one deal and then each individual members of the Wu had their own deals with different record labels. But there was still one entity.

Taylor Pollard: Exactly. That's exactly what it is.

Rickerby Hinds: You mentioned that you did the giveaway and that, you know, the Lakers were involved and the Dodgers were involved.

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. You know what, I'm honestly super surprised too. And it's kind of hard to describe the point A to point B. Because literally, like when I graduated from school in 2016, my mom was like, what are you going to do now? You know? And for me to be where I am now, I am completely in shock. And if you would've told me I would be doing this in 2019 I wouldn't believe you.

Taylor Pollard: But yeah. So in 2017 when her picture first went viral, then after that we got the opportunity to go to New York Fashion Week. And so that's when she became the youngest designer to ever showcase in New York Fashion Week. That happened in 2017 as well, too.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. And so they reached out to her based upon her picture going viral the first time to be able to have the designing opportunity. So then after that she went

on the Steve Harvey Show. And so from the Steve Harvey Show, that's when Nike found her, and that's when she did her first campaign with Nike. And then after that she signed a contract with Nike, and that's when she did a campaign with LeBron James.

Rickerby Hinds: Tell me something, what have you learned from experiences that could be perceived as being a negative experience that has strengthened you or that has kept you moving forward at what seems to be a pretty dynamic pace? Like this is-

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. You know, in the beginning it was really scary just because, I didn't really have any experience with business. And I don't really know anyone who owns businesses. So we were kind of just playing it by ear, you know, doing what we feel is right. But as far as what keeps us going, for example, at the back to school drive that we did, just seeing so many families that are in need. And well, you know, we gave out free food and free water and stuff like that. And just seeing people who genuinely needed it, and kids, they were literally in tears because they weren't able, everyone was able to receive school supplies. So just seeing stuff like that, it was really like, okay, what I'm doing is really making a difference. And that's what really pushes me to want to keep going.

Rickerby Hinds: This is really good. I grew up right off Crenshaw and Florence, so I-

Taylor Pollard: Oh awesome. Okay.

Rickerby Hinds: Yeah, I always wanted to be from Englewood.

Taylor Pollard: Super local.

Rickerby Hinds: I know. But I never was from Englewood. So I know that space, I know the area. And so I know the types of needs that can be in that space. You mentioned that you didn't have someone specific in business that you could refer to. But what have you learned about business from others, from anyone else in your life that you are applying to what you're doing now?

Taylor Pollard: I would say that I kind of just learned more from experience just with doing it. And you know, I did make a lot of mistakes in the beginning as we were setting everything up and moving forward. But I think experience [crosstalk 00:18:55]-

Rickerby Hinds: For example, what was a mistake? So someone else don't do this when they're getting going.

Taylor Pollard: Oh okay. A really big mistake that I made would be, because you know, the thing is in the beginning people are throwing contracts at you. And I didn't really know what things meant. And so you kind of sign off on things that you probably shouldn't. So I think a really good advice is when you're getting started is to have a lawyer, you know? To read those kinds of things because they

understand the wording. You know, people word things crazy, and you may sign something that you didn't mean to sign off on. But you know, so I think a big thing is to have a lawyer to read things.

Rickerby Hinds: No, this is good to know. Some of us believe we know way more than we think we know. Can you talk a little bit too about your creative process? Because you alluded to it a little bit when you started talking about the photography and framing and really looking at photos in a particular way, and how those photos can have a particular impact on social media. But your creative process clearly goes beyond just the photography. So can you talk a little bit about what's your creative process is, either together or individually?

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. You know, I'm always inspired by pictures just on Instagram or anywhere. Honestly, just seeing, especially people of color just being empowered. And so I think that's really what drives me when it comes to creating content. And even when I was studying here at UCR, that's when I really decided like, okay, I really have a passion for seeing people of color in a positive light. Because I just feel like for so long content has been created as far as, you know, we're either depicted as something negative. And really here at UCR, I figured out that that's what I wanted to do. Is just because like, when I was taking photography classes, literally everything that we studied, the artists would be white males, you know? And it kind of made me angry because I'm just like, you know, I know that these aren't the only type of people that were creating art.

Taylor Pollard: You know, I want to see some black woman photographers, you know? Or black male photographers, or any other ethnicity, you know? And so since I wasn't getting that I was like, okay, well I need to create it for myself then. You know, I need to show you what the type of content I want to see. And so with Kheris, I feel like we've been able to do a successful job with that. And a lot of people they reach out like, oh my gosh, you've made me love my skin. Like I used to want to bleach my skin. Or I have people telling me like, oh my gosh, I used to be in the shower, I would take long showers hoping that my skin would get lighter. But you know, seeing Kheris talk about how much she loves herself and her skin, and who she is naturally, it really just makes me love myself and who I am. So just getting those type of feedback is really what pushes me to keep... You know, it inspires me to create that kind of content.

Rickerby Hinds: Yeah. You know what? And that's so great. One of the things that we didn't talk about directly, but it's this idea of being a big sister. Can you talk a little bit about the big sister aspect of this?

Taylor Pollard: Yeah, because the thing is, as her big sister my number one goal, even in this industry, whatever we're doing, my number one goal is to protect her and to make sure that she's safe. And that means her feelings or physically, like, you know, to make sure that she's safe. But when she was going through the bullying situation, it was kind of hard because on one aspect, I just wanted to go

down to the school and grab these kids. Like, don't talk to her like that. Don't treat her like that.

Taylor Pollard: But then, you know, at the end of the day it's like, what would that change? You know, I feel like it was more so about I needed to instill in her as well to know you're going to be going through some things through your life, but you need to have that inner self confidence to know that it doesn't matter what anybody say about you. Because people are going to say things about you regardless. But you need to know that it doesn't matter what other people think of you, it's only what you think of yourself. So if you know that you're a boss, you're powerful. Like you're an amazing person. It doesn't matter if someone tells you negative things because you'll know what you are. You know, no one can tell you what you are.

Rickerby Hinds: Where did you get that confidence that you were now passing onto your sister?

Taylor Pollard: Honestly, I think I got that confidence just from life experience. And me coming to UCR, it really was my first experience being on my own. This really was almost like a culture shock for me coming to UCR, because I grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood and stuff like that. And so when I came to UCR, this was my first time really feeling like a minority. I really felt like I wasn't enough, you know? Or even being in the classroom and I'm the only black person in the classroom. I've never experienced that before. I don't know, but it's like you almost have to become confident to be comfortable being in a room where you're the only person that look like you. So I feel like from going through that, I passed on that to my sister.

Speaker 1: [music 00:24:35].

Rickerby Hinds: Now let's get into the Creator State of Mind. In each episode we asked our guests to share what's been on their minds, something they can't stop thinking about, a new challenge they're facing, or what's inspired them into action recently. We call it the Creator State of Mind.

Taylor Pollard: Well actually, my sister, she just won an award from the Princess Diana Organization, and they nominated her for creating positive change. You know, I just think to get recognized on such a huge, huge, huge, huge platform like that is crazy. Yeah, it's super crazy. What's something else that inspire me? Oh, you know, working with LeBron James. Because Kheris, he came out with his 16th shoe, his LeBron Sixteens, and he picked 16 women that inspired him to create this shoe. And it's actually the first Nike shoe that was ever designed by all African American women. And since Kheris was one of those 16 women that he chose, now that's just like, I don't know, it just really made us like, oh my gosh, we need to do so much more. And now she's like, I need my own store. So you know, yeah, her dreams are big. So we're like, okay, so we're doing the research that we need to do so hopefully that she can have her own store.

Rickerby Hinds: With the 16 women that were selected as inspiration, what role will Kheris play in, you know, will there be appearances, will there be things that are connected to?

Taylor Pollard: Believe it was the beginning of this year, and so she went to New York Fashion Week for LeBron. He actually did a collaboration with Harlem Fashion Week. And so they do a whole showcase and everything. Yeah, so that part kind of passed. But with that he chose 16... Because the thing is, it's the strongest Nike shoe ever as well. And so he chose 16 women in his life that inspired him to create the strongest shoe. So the women included like his wife, his daughter, his mom, and Serena Williams and other people like that. And so Kheris was one of those 16 women that he chose as his inspiration.

Rickerby Hinds: That's very cool.

Taylor Pollard: It was awesome.

Rickerby Hinds: That's really cool. So with all the things that are going on, what new challenges are you facing right now?

Taylor Pollard: I would say a challenge is like, what's next?

Rickerby Hinds: Okay.

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. Kind of just what's next, just because we've done so much in such a short amount of time. And so it's just like trying to figure out, okay, so how do we keep growing and not get stagnant?

Rickerby Hinds: Yes.

Taylor Pollard: Yeah.

Speaker 1: [music 00:27:22].

Rickerby Hinds: It is always a valuable learning opportunity to take time to reflect. At the end of each interview, we like to ask our guests this, in hindsight, what is something you wish you would've known when you were starting out?

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. You know, I think knowledge really is everything. And so I really wish that I would've kept going to school instead of stopping, because I really want to go back to school to get my MBA. And so I wish that I wouldn't have taken a break when I graduated in 2016, I would've kept going. Because then, you know, I probably would know so much more, like about accounting. Oh my gosh. Yeah, that was a big thing too, accounting and doing all that stuff. Yeah, so I just think knowledge really is everything. I really wish I would've kept going to school.

Rickerby Hinds: Well listen, that is, you know, since I do work at a university, it's something great to hear because a lot of times we don't necessarily know as academics how what we do affects our students directly, especially when they leave. So to have you have this type of success and to see these things happening, and to know that this was somewhat of that foundation, interestingly enough, that you changed your major to something that ended up being the catalysts for this.

Taylor Pollard: Yeah. Yeah, I completely agree with that too.

Rickerby Hinds: But thank you so much, really for taking the time to come out. And I am looking forward to seeing what happens with both your sister, with Kheris, as well as with Flexin' In My Complexion.

Taylor Pollard: Thank you.

Rickerby Hinds: And you know, whatever else comes out of this, apparently, this growing dynamic relationship.

Taylor Pollard: Yes. Thank you so much for having me.

Rickerby Hinds: Absolutely. You're welcome.

Speaker 1: [music 00:29:10].

Rickerby Hinds: Tune in for our next episode with Raphael Lopez, aka, Alf Alpha. A UC Riverside alumnus who went from playing soccer and DJing concerts on campus, to playing music for festival goers at Coachella.

Rickerby Hinds: Thanks for listening, listening. Find more information about our guests at creatorstate.com. Do you know someone creating something great? Send us what you're creating for a chance to be featured in an upcoming episode, write us at creatorstate@ucr.edu. There's a team creating this podcast, help us out by subscribing on Apple podcasts, SoundCloud, Spotify, or wherever you listen. And while you're there, leave us a review. Our producer for the show is Jennifer Mary, with audio and editing by Kevin Williams. Digital strategy by Kelly McGrail, Madeline Adamo, and [inaudible 00:30:07]. Designed by Chrissy Danforth, Denise Wolf, Brad Rowe and creative director, Luis Sands. Special thanks to Austin Quick, Christina Rodriguez, Christie Zwicky, Jessica Webber, Kate Beach, Kristie Bieber, Taylor Rothford, and Tess Eirich. This show is brought to you by the University of California Riverside. I'm your host, Rickerby Hinds. Thanks for joining us and the Creator State.